

Party Pooper Dogs

By Kerri Danskin

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Last weekend I experienced a doggie drama that is sadly a typical part of summer weekends by the shore in New Jersey. It was a lesson for me in the ways people can keep their dogs happy and calm and protect them from either being the victim or perpetrator in aggressive interactions.

As a guest at an old friend's canal-side barbecue, I watched as three guests arrived with their dogs in tow. The dog of the house, a Havanese called Monty, was in his glory with his favorite people and dogs all around him. The first two pooches that arrived were very well-mannered, but it was clear from the moment he arrived that the third, a Puggle named Gizmo, had a little more spunk to him.

In the hubbub of the party, the dogs visited with guests and each other, frolicking happily, occasionally barking at ducks and geese passing by on the canal, making the kids giggle. Dinner was served and the human guests were enjoying the fare when there was a bit of a dustup between Gizmo and a Labradoodle rescue named Soco. Gizmo's owners noted that their dog has some food aggression issues, so Soco was brought inside to diffuse the situation. A short while later when Soco was let out again (mostly to keep dog hair away from the food), it was clear she was still shaken up by the fight. Her tail was between her legs and she very clearly tried to stay away from Gizmo. Before she was down the stairs to the patio, though, Gizmo was "greeting" her. Looking down at him from where I was seated, I sensed right away that he was getting aggressive and wouldn't you know it, about five seconds later he really lunged at Soco, much more seriously than before.

Soco had a rough upbringing with some abuse, so she already has some trauma issues, but even though she was not physically hurt, the poor thing walked around the rest of the night hiding in corners with her tail between her legs. The fireworks that started across the bay didn't help things either. I felt so terrible for her.

I learned a few things from this experience. For one, if I see a dog getting aggressive, even if it's only indicated with posture and other very subtle clues, as it was with Gizmo, I should be more assertive in letting the owners know so they can prevent this kind of thing. Also, I guess the kindest thing in some situations is to separate your dog from the situation that causes him trouble. While the food was out, Gizmo probably should have been inside or at least somewhere away from that area so he wouldn't get himself in trouble (after all, if he had lost control and bitten Soco or, god forbid, one of the kids, the situation could have been far more serious for him). As for Soco, she probably should have stayed inside after the first incident with Gizmo. There were some complications because no one wanted dogs near the food, but maybe an area other than the kitchen could have served as a safe place for Soco to calm down.

I think we often look at dogs as simple and happy buddies, but when they interact together, things can get pretty complicated. Since we don't speak their language, it seems the best thing to do is to take what they do let us know about them and use it to protect them and make them happy.